Camera Obscura **[1]**

June 5, 2017 Memoir [2]
Illness [3]
Into Sanity [4]

Personal Essay by Rebecca Schumejda

Fighting the Urge to Go Blank

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');



Every science experiment starts with a hypothesis. I've proposed dozens of explanations and conducted subsequent investigations since the tragedy occurred, and still the truth remains elusive.

Yes, my brother has been incarcerated for killing his fiancée, but I'm not thinking about that now. Right now, I'm concentrating on the pinhole camera I'm helping my eldest daughter make for her elementary school science fair. The construction is simple: a light-proof container with light-sensitive photographic paper at one end and a pinhole at the other. The process could be likened to the way a schizophrenic's mind works. There's only darkness, then the outside world invades through a tiny hole, and the mind takes what is there and flips it upside down.

I get the concept, but I really don't.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

My daughter wanted to use her science project from last year, a homemade lava lamp constructed from a two-liter soda bottle, vegetable oil, water, food coloring, and Alka-Seltzer. *Come on Mom, no one will ever know*, she argued. *But we will, and why bother if you're not going to learn something new?* It's the fall of 2015, and we've just moved an hour north from an upstate city in New York with a population of 23,731 to this rural town of 1,469. She's adjusting. The bugs, the mice, the woods, the quiet nights creep her out. She constantly reminds us she hates living here.

His sons, my nephews, were asleep in the house when my brother Steve stabbed their mother to death a year ago on Labor Day weekend, but I can't concentrate on that. I've thought about that for hours, days, weeks, months; now, I'm focusing on what I need to set up a makeshift darkroom in our upstairs bathroom: dark curtains or maybe just black plastic garbage bags, a red light, and developing solution.

This project is becoming more complex than initially planned. There are so many steps. It's like trying to understand how someone you thought you knew could commit such a violent act. I went to seven different stores in search of black-and-white photo paper, and none of them carry it anymore. We finally sent away for the paper, which took over a week and set us behind schedule. *Mom, if we lived in Kingston, we'd find the paper*, my daughter said.

Before the tragedy, if someone told me this could happen in our family, I would have thought they were insane. For a long time, my husband and I were convinced that someone else had done this and framed my brother.

On the side of my refrigerator is a photo of Steve and me from 2010. His arm is wrapped around my neck, his wrist rests on my shoulder, and his hand cascades over my heart. The picture was taken on Halloween in the kitchen of my old house, the house my daughter wants to move back into. She was dressed as a ladybug; she'd just turned two. She wore a pair of red rain boots, too big for her, so that when she walked, her foot slipped out and into a mud puddle. She would've finished her rounds with a soggy sock sloshing around in her boot if Uncle Steve hadn't taken off his sock and given it to her; it was ten sizes too big, but her boot didn't slide off again.

In the picture, we're smiling, my little brother and I; my head leans against his, or you could say his head leans against mine. Amy was there, too, the woman he says he still loves, the woman he killed four years later, even though she isn't visible. She was the one who told us to smile; she's the one who captured that moment.

• • •

I help my daughter, who's now eight, cover the inside of the box with black duct tape. She's singing a song about togetherness she says her class will sing during the morning assembly on Thursday.

I smile, because this is precisely why we moved here to this small town. My husband and I were exhausted by the negativity that permeated Kingston. A normal conversation at the bus stop between parents with young children in tow went something like this: *Yeah, he's with that ho, I'm gonna fuck that bitch up, show her what's up.* We thought we only had to protect our daughters from the outside world.

My childhood in the late 1980s was privileged in that my dad advanced himself from poverty to the middle class and took his family with him. He was a roofer in Long Island and embedded his work ethic in us. He never stopped, even after he was told by his cardiologist that he needed to slow down. There was a magic about him; he had this way of making people feel good about themselves, as if they could accomplish anything. He was my biggest supporter when I began writing.

In my seventh-grade English class, the teacher asked us to write a poem, but she thought my poem was too dark. She then summoned the principal, social worker, guidance counselor, and my parents to a meeting, where she expressed her deep concern for me. She actually didn't like me; I'd stood up to her several times in front of the whole class. She had a desk drawer full of Koosh balls—colorful balls made out of rubber strings that attached to a soft rubber core—and she'd toss them to students when she wanted them to answer a question. As I recall, she derived an unhealthy amount of pleasure from pelting daydreamers. Her cackle would permeate the room.

We all sat around the table. The teacher went on and on, the social worker chimed in, the principal advised my parents that the poem was a warning sign that shouldn't be ignored. My dad listened, and when his turn came, he asked to

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

see what I'd written.

He reached out his calloused, tar-stained hand. The poem was passed to him, and the room went eerily silent while he read. My mom stared down at the table, as if she were the one on trial. I watched my dad's eyes move over my words for what seemed like forever. I remember thinking he'd taken time off from work just to read a poem.

After he was through, he tossed the paper down, put his gigantic hand on my shoulder, and said, *This is a really good poem, Rebecca, a really good poem.* For a minute, no one said anything, but then my dad looked directly at the teacher and said, *Don't ask students to write poetry if you don't want to hear their truths.*

A pinhole camera's shutter is composed of duct tape and aluminum foil; it opens and closes to expose the film. The shutter's purpose is to protect the film, just as a parent protects a child, as my parents protected us. But once the world comes spilling in, the parent doesn't have control over what happens to the child; outside forces come into play. With an old-fashioned photograph, there's the angle at which the camera is pointing, the intensity of the sunlight, the way the film is transported and handled, the chemicals used during the developing phase.

Although we were all thinking it after Amy's murder, one of my cousins was the first to say, *Thank God your father isn't alive. This would kill him.*

• • •

In the spring of 2015, the day I moved Steve's belongings out of his house pending a short sale, I came across some other faded family photos. I found these vestiges of my childhood a week after my mom was sitting in the kitchen of the parents of the woman my brother had killed, visiting with her grandsons. As she told me later, my mother was already feeling out of place when Amy's sister bluntly stated, *You know, he is going to spend a long time in prison.*

That's like saying, *You know, your sister is dead.*

There was no other reason for this statement but to inflict pain. For weeks, I was livid. Her statement was and is true. She had every right to be hurt, to be incensed; her sister had been murdered by my brother. I really liked Amy's sister before this happened. We weren't close, but I liked her. I don't dislike her now, but we are on opposite sides of a tragedy. If I were her, I would have said something even more incendiary to the mother of Amy's murderer. But now, all I want to do is ask her why no one wants to talk about mental illness.

My brother's body killed Amy, but his mind was not a willing accomplice that night. The evidence remains publicly undisclosed because he accepted a plea bargain, which spared him from a life sentence (instead he got 27 years in prison). So, the newspapers portrayed him as a monster who stabbed his fiancée to death, claiming the initial investigation showed there was a domestic dispute. But I've studied the evidence, and based on the limited explanations gleaned from police reports, forensics, and my brother's account, I've formulated my own hypotheses.

The day of the tragedy, Steve helped his soon-to-be brother-in-law work on his motorcycle, and then they decided to watch a football game at a bar. They drank at several bars until they were asked to leave one for being too loud. They headed outside, then my brother bolted. Steve thought someone was chasing him. He said he'd been pursued by these people before and was terrified. He tried to get into a woman's car. He was screaming, *Help me, help me!* He staggered into the middle of the road and lay down. Another car almost hit him but swerved at the last second. Amy's brother and some other men pulled him to the side of the road, but Steve resisted; he thought they were going to kill him. He tensed up and tried to play dead.

My brother called a woman on the scene by his fiancée's name. He begged her, *Amy, take me home, I want to go home, I'm sorry.* When the police and Amy's brother came, the cops let him walk home with her brother; apparently, they believed the best remedy for too much alcohol was to sleep it off. According to the police reports, Amy's brother stayed for awhile, waiting for his wife to pick him up, joking around with his sister for the last time.

No one knows the truth of what happened next but Steve. It seems likely, however, that not long after he was put to bed, he was spooked when Amy came into the room to join him. Later, he told a forensic psychologist that he was

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

defending himself from demons—the demons none of us knew were haunting him. My brother chose to drink that night, even though he had experienced heightened delusions in the past while under the influence. He knew something was wrong, but never asked for help.

I was two months pregnant with my second child when he killed Amy. My little brother got to hold my baby once, in the visiting room of the Madison County Jail a few weeks after she was born. He held her tightly against his orange jumpsuit, rested his nose on top of her head, and inhaled deeply until the guard stared at him. Then he handed her back, saying he remembered the first time he'd held his eldest son. We both teared up.

In 2015, after throwing out and giving away some of his belongings, my family carted the rest to the curb and put up a sign that read *FREE*; within a few hours, strangers had seized what was left. In one of the few photographs I kept, I was nine years old, and my brother was three; we sat sandwiched between my mother and father on an elephant's back. We were there at the same time in this picture; the circus of voices had not yet pitched a tent in his brain.

I often find myself taking the photo out of my wallet and turning it upside down, redistributing the weight, so that the elephant is crushing our family like mental illness has. I'm afraid of contributing to the stigma of violence and mental illness by telling this story—or that you'll think I'm trying to justify an inexcusable act.

In the county jail, my brother asked me to send him physics books, soft-covered because he couldn't receive hardcovers there. Before sentencing, he told me he looked forward to prison. Now that he was on antipsychotics, Steve said, he felt better than he'd ever felt before and that he would be okay, that we shouldn't worry. I was comforted by the thought of him working out equations for velocity, efficiency, and universal gravitation.

I'm afraid I'll never get the chance to hug him outside of a prison visiting area, while simultaneously terrified of the chance of hugging him on the outside.

But what I'm most petrified of is pretending this didn't happen.

• • •

After the photo paper arrives in the mail, my daughter and I go outside and set up the camera on a table behind the house. She hates facing the woods in our backyard because they frighten her. She pulls up the shutter and tapes it back. Then we go inside to eat grilled cheese sandwiches and chicken noodle soup, because the sun is shining but the temperature is below thirty degrees. We do this three times, exposing the film for different intervals—for thirty, ten, and five minutes.

Remember, I tell her. *If you expose the paper to light, the picture you took will disappear.*

When I was sixteen and Steve was eight, my mother swallowed a handful of pills. My father broke down their bedroom door and rushed her to the hospital, leaving us there. While I talked to my boyfriend on the telephone, my brother played with a toy fire truck, extending the ladder against the sofa, walking his fingers up the rungs to rescue the people trapped in a burning house. She was institutionalized for months, but we never talked about what happened.

In lieu of chemical developer, my daughter and I use a natural recipe we found on the Web composed of water, dried mint, baking soda, and Vitamin C tablets. Then we use water and lemon juice for the stopper solution. To explain alkaline and acid, we print out the pH scale and glue the pretty rainbow picture to her tri-fold display board.

In county jail, my brother was only allowed to have four photos in his cell at once.

Sometimes at night, I sit on the staircase above the room my mom has stayed in since her son killed the mother of his children and listen to her cry. Every day, she asks, *How could this happen?*—the same way my daughter incessantly asks when we're moving back to our old house.

We can't go back, I tell them.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

We try to help my mom. Last week, we urged her to connect with a therapist. She called Medicare and was told there was a one-year waiting list to see a psychiatrist. Nonchalantly, the woman on the phone told her that she could put her on the list if she wanted. *One year?* my mother asked again. *Well, yes,* the woman said, *at least one year.* My mother hung up.

When my daughter and I line up the three photos we took, from longest to shortest exposure, the images look like a row of waning metal bars.

After Steve had experienced several unusual incidents in college that we chalked up to binge drinking, my grandmother, my mother's mother, told me her husband had unexplainable episodes of depression and hopelessness throughout his life. My grandmother said he tried to kill himself a dozen times. Later, when I asked my mom about her father's episodes, she said she didn't remember.

The second set of pictures we took are close-ups of branches that appear to be knotted fingers trying to grip the empty sky.

I think of Amy, of the last day she spent with her sons, of the reverberation of her laughter. I imagine the terror of being ambushed by someone you trust in your own home.

We haven't taken my eldest daughter to visit my brother in prison. We want her to remember him as Uncle Steve, not as Inmate 21368 at the county jail. We let her send him letters and pictures. He reciprocates with elaborate drawings and incoherent responses. He still sends letters and pictures to his sons, too, even though he knows I'm not allowed to pass them on to my nephews.

Until I could no longer close the lid, I stored them in a shoebox. Now, I place them in a plastic container. I wonder if there is enough space in my broken heart for twenty-something years of this.

I have a picture of Steve holding my daughter when she was a jaundiced baby. He's sitting in my grandmother's rocking chair, and she's resting on his chest. This had been taken only a few years after he left college. By the time my brother was eighteen, he'd been drinking heavily, but that didn't seem out of the ordinary for a college student. We'd had no idea he was actually throwing gasoline on a fire.

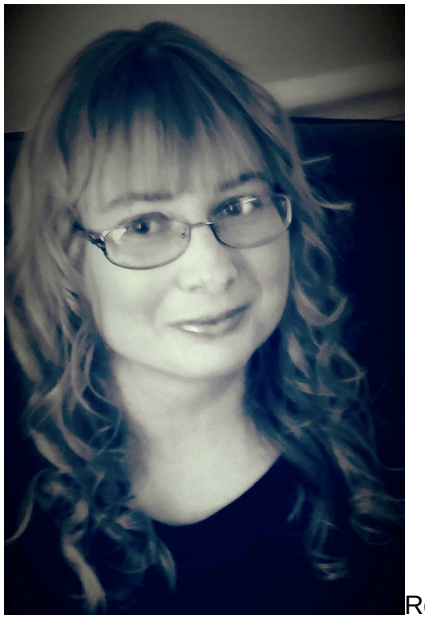
In the picture, my daughter's skin is the color of the jumpsuit he wears now. My brother looks down at her expressionlessly, as if he's cradling air. It makes me think of that poem I wrote, even though I can't recall what it was about. I remember how proud my dad was of my honesty.

The truth is, I don't care about the science fair. My hypotheses involve warning signs that could not have predicted what happened. I just want to prove to my daughter that if we're honest, we can, like light, travel through this tragedy as if it were a pinhole, free of distortion and manipulation—that we don't need to hide our thoughts in the dark chambers of our minds.

Art Information

- "If Everything Is Connected, so Am I" © Jill Slaymaker; used by permission.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

Rebecca Schumejda is the author of several full-length poetry collections, including *Falling Forward* (Sunny Outside Press, 2009), *Cadillac Men* (NYQ Books, 2013), *Waiting at the Dead End Diner* (Bottom Dog Press, 2014), and several chapbooks. Her new collection, *Our One-Way Street*, is forthcoming from NYQ Books in 2017. She graduated with her master's in creative writing and poetics from San Francisco State University. She currently lives in New York's Hudson Valley with her family.

Schumejda is working on a collection that addresses mental illness, tragedy, and incarceration. Some of those pieces have been or will be published in *Borderlands Texas Poetry Review*, *Cape Rock*, *Gravel*, *Juked*, *Main Street Rag*, *Open Minds Quarterly*, and the *Pikeville Review*.

For more information, visit Rebecca Schumejda's website [5].

Source URL: https://mail.talkingwriting.com/camera-obscura

Links:
[1] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/camera-obscura
[2] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/memoir
[3] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/mental-illness
[4] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/sanity
[5] http://rebeccaschumejda.com/

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');